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## **Sudhir Chakravarti and Folk Song: Opening Up a Different Way in the Field of Research on Folk Culture and Literary History**

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### **Abstract**

We know that India is a country of spiritual understanding. There are different layers of meaning imposed regarding religion. Sudhir Chakravarti chose this field for his research work, which did not focus on the people and life of mainstream society. Instead, the people and their songs are of prime interest. In the initial stages, it was not very easy to communicate with the people. This journey was actually very challenging. He stepped out of his circle and immersed himself in a group of ordinary people. The search for man is, in fact, a search for 'manush ratan dhan' (man is most valuable). This critical approach not only helps us understand spiritual understanding and the multiple layers of religion but also allows us to think deeply about the social, political, economic, and cultural history of that time. It brings out the voice of protest against the upper class of society. These artists, along with their songs and performances, were totally neglected by the ruling power of the time. He has worked with the communities of Sahebhdhani and Bala Hari. After 1970, Sudhir Chakravarti has travelled through various districts of West Bengal, namely Nadia, Murshidabad, Birbhum, Burdwan, Bankura, and Purulia. The focus of this article is to illustrate the literary lapses and contributions of Sudhir Chakravarti in the field of literature.

**Keywords:** Folk culture, Multiple layers, Community, Peripheral position

In the tradition of Bengali song, we could not recognize the hidden position of certain types of songs. From Charyagaan to Rabindranath, a line of this hidden song has been expressing itself in a very secretive way, but its subtle glimmers have not been taken seriously by music connoisseurs. In his book *Bangla Gaaner Char Diganta* Chakravarti elaborately discussed the origin and development of Bengali song. Once upon a time in this country, the need for 'Lokayat Guhya Dharmasadhana' (hidden religious practices) required hiding the 'Tatta' behind the words. However, an introspective consideration shows that the trend of secret songs, from Charyagan to Nathpanthi songs, Vaishnava Sahajiya songs, Shaktagaan, and Baulgan, also touched Rabindranath's music (Chakravarti 21). It is called a metaphorical song, which has one meaning outside and another meaning inside. It takes a different kind of hearing mentality and requires perception. It probably takes a bit of insight too. The darkness of many unspoken words, the sound of deep footsteps, and the beauty of many

elusive sweetnesses are caught in the innermost nature of this vision and hearing. From this mentality, the invisible hidden in the heart becomes visible.

A deeply hidden identity has remained unnoticed by the streams of Bengali songs for thousands of years. If we dissect the body of Bengali songs from Charyagan to Baulgaan, covered in metaphors, we shall find an undercurrent. It is true that the 'Dehatattva' (related to the body) song is a folk song that has been going on for a long time in our country. There has been no identification or thematic analysis of the physical characteristics and diversity of the songs of the body, which have been mixed in the flow of many kinds of Bengali songs for many days (Chakravarti 35). During his research Chakravarti have identified only those songs that contain body-related words as body-related songs, and as a result, the prophetic-educated society has a somewhat negative perception of these songs.

At same time it was not believed that only the Bauls wrote the songs of Dehatattva. In fact, the very original source of Bengali songs, from the Siddhas' Charyagiti to the songs of the Sahajiya Vaishnavas of the Middle Ages, the songs of the Yogi community, and even Ramprasad's Shaktagan, clearly mention 'Dehasadhana' (body related religious practices). However, the term 'dehasanket' is most widely found in Baul, Murshida, and Marfati songs, Kartabhaja songs, Sahebhdhani, Balrami, and various types of folk Bengali songs. His book named *Lakayater Antarmahal* is written to establish these issues. The reason is that these sub-religious sects are not only materialistic but also believe in guru-directed kayasadhana (Chakravarti 17). These songs are mainly born at the end of 'Kayasadhana' (related to the body) or for the correct guidance of that 'Dehasadhan'.

### **Socio-political background and its significance:**

Spirituality is a fundamental aspect and omnipresent in our country. Searching for God is the basic purpose of people in all the different religious communities of this country. In 1896, Jogendra Nath Bhattacharya (1850-1899) wrote his book titled *Hindu Caste and Sects* in which he defined Bauls as low-class men and dirty people. Books on this subject include Paul Brunton's *a Search in Secret India* (1934) and Pramod Kumar Chatterjee's *Tantabilashir Sadhu Sanga* (1958). Later, Akshay Kumar Dutta (1820-1886), in his book *Bharatbarshiya Upasak Sampraday* (1911), depicted the socio-cultural and economic conditions of the time. This research is not very commendable (Mukhopadhyay-31). That's why we have to wait to get the actual picture until Sudhir Chakravarti's love and dedication reveal the folk cult in West Bengal. The originality of Sudhir Chakravarti lies in the fact that he has sought to find the history of people's lives through music. It must be remembered that before Sudhir Chakrabati, Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Kshitimohan Sen (1880-1960), Mansuruddin (1904-1987), Upendranath Bhattacharya (1899-1970) and Ashutosh Bhattacharya (1909-1984) were all involved in this work. The book entitled *Songs of Lalon Fakir collected by Rabindranath Tagore* is an important document regarding the subject matter. The Baul Fakirs and the people belonging to these religious sects were abused outright. Jogen Bhattacharya has depicted all these in his book. Another Muslim writer named Rewajuddin book entitled *Baul Dhangsa Fatwa* he declares fatwa (verdict) urging the people to annihilate the Bauls. Before Sudhir Chakravarti entered in this field, we two important and famous books. One is *Banglar Baul O Baul Gaan* by Upendranath Bhattacharya and another is *Obscure Religious Sects as Background of Bengali Literature* by Dr. Shashibhusan Dasgupta. Originality of their works were limited with in the analytical perspective and theory of Baul Gaan and philosophy of Vaishnavisms.

It is interesting to note that the style and manner of collecting the songs of Sudhir Chakravarti were something unique. As he came into close contact with various people, sects, and folk songs, he understood the subtle symbolism that bears a deeper meaning of life, the beliefs of particular “sub-religions,” the behaviour, and a stratified interplay of history in society. He has not only evoked the ethos of the literariness of “folk” songs; rather, he has brought to light the hidden secrets and tricks of their devotional life (*gupto sadhana marg er rohoso*). It can be considered that he explored the lives of people who were equally exploited and deprived. Society is full of sin but left protesting through songs of sin. In his book *Baul Fakir Katha* he highlights the issue of *kayasadhana* and protest. Their way of life is a form of resistance, and songs play a vital role. He is looking for those hidden sub-religious people who share a self-reliant yet defiant life in a rigid social structure (Chakravarti 65-66). Chaitanyadev’s generous Vaishnavism, Sufis, and Bauls like to identify as the main impetus for the development of these Guru-disciple sub-religious sects. These religions were developed out of chauvinistic particularism. Sufis and Bauls have been mixed together based on the hatred of the royalty of Brahmins and distrust of mullahs in the lives of the minor sects. Kuber Gosain was the main lyricist of the Sahebadhanis. Jadubindu Gosain was a disciple of Kuber Gosain (Mukopadhyay38).

### Life and Work: A Brief Overview:

Sudhir Chakaravarti was born in Shibpur, in the Howrah district. Chakravarti was known for his research works on Folk religion, Lalan Fakir and Cultural Anthropology in Bengal. He spent thirty years researching the folk culture by traveling to different villages all over the West Bengal. He was a professor of Bengali literature from 1958 to 1994. Cultural anthropologist Sudhir Chakravarti passed away on 15 December, 2020 (Saha 4). He was noted for his research on folk religion and music, especially Lalan Fakir’s songs. He wrote in detail about communities and sub-religions. His book *Bratya Lokayat Lalon* on Lalan Fakir is highly regarded. He taught Bengali literature at Krishnagar Government College and was guest lecturer at Jadavpur University. He wrote and edited books. He edited the Bengali magazine *Dhrubapada*, which was received with much enthusiasm. His friends remember him for his kindness and grace. He received the ‘Ananda Purashkar’ in 2002 for his book *Baul Fakir Katha* and the ‘Sahitya Academi Award’ 2004. He got the awards of the eminent teacher from Calcutta University in 2006. His notable books include *Gabhir Nirjon Pathe*, *Sadar Mafassal*, *Bangla Flimer Gaan o Satyajit Roy*.

Chakravarti conducted research on the theory based on man and religion. This relationship highlights the urge for a meeting between God and the devotee. Obviously, the medium of attending to the self depends upon the performance of their songs. Another point that comes to mind in this context is that the songs of Kuber Gosain are not widely known among the numerous audiences in our country, although his songs hold a distinct and definite place in our cultural life. The songs have double meanings and follow symbolic interpretations. It really takes time to realize their meaning and language. However, it must be admitted that the local people are able to understand the songs; they can perceive them. It is noteworthy that the songs sung by Kuber Gosain are aimed at developing human relationships because he wanted to free the soul from bondage. His songs possess genuine vigour. In the book *Gabir Nirjon Pathe* he delineates all these issues elaborately. We should remember that the subject matter of the songs relates to *Dehatattava* (Chakravarti 33-35). Baul Faki's doctrine is not a religion or a community; it is a life philosophy and practice. This

doctrine highlights the message of great humanism (Chakravarti 135). One truth, however, emerges from the analysis of Sahedhani Srampodoy: it is not only a reaction from the upper class of society, but it is also the main opposition to the ruling class of the time and their oppression. The songs of Kuber Gosian are not merely songs; unique meanings and symbols are embedded in them. He also says in his edited book titled *Bangla Dehattava Gaan* "Je bastu jbaner kran/tai bula kare sadhan" (The thing that is the cause of life is / therefore, accomplished by the Bauls) (Chakaravarti 10). Venus is symbolized here. This Venus is born from a combination of different objects. There are seeds of life within Venus.

### **Why Chakravarti's Work and Analysis Are Important in the Context of Literature and Cultural History**

Constantly affirms and doesn't validate existence of these religious people. This is not an attack on the lower-class man; rather, it is an attack on the ruthless behaviour in our society. They stand in stark contrast to the display of magnified need. It was Sudhir Chakravarti's unique zone of interest and exploration of the folk cult. He used to teach at Vivekananda College, Kolkata, around 1958-59. He had a profound interest and eagerness about Bengali folk songs. He got a job at Krishnagar Government College in 1960. At the primary level, he received a fellowship from the University Grants Commission. He chose the topic "Folk Songs of Nadia." The subject was absolutely unprecedented for him. He knew little about the folk songs and singers but nothing about the intricacies of the said discipline. He used to go to different parts of Nadia on different days. Gradually, he became accustomed to the village people. Slowly, he started to collect and endeavour to listen to their way of life. He developed the habit of staying with the villagers, having meals with them, and sometimes sharing their beds. Most of the people belonged to the poor class of society.

He perceived the village-based world through such songs to understand the profound, solitary ways of life. It was only Sudhir Chakravarti who had perceived the world through the songs. This became possible because their actual communication was done through songs. The most important aspect of his work is that he highlights the significance of literary history along with the exploration of "periphery". Although there has been some work on this topic, gaps in the analysis remain. He has been able to uncover the true meaning of the words used in their songs, delving deep into life. This work was not easy at all. As a result of this effort, the creation of the people on the edge opens a new horizon in the writing of literature. The exchange of literary elements immediately captures the connection with other forms of literature. He has tried to identify the literary lapses, and he has dedicated his entire life to this work. Thus, he has made a great contribution to literature.

### **Critical Thinking: A New Perspective on Folk Performance and Identity**

Sudhir Chakravarti is known for his research on folk religion, Lalan Fakir, Sahebhdhani sampraday, Balahari sampraday, and cultural anthropology in West Bengal. In the course of quotidian interactions, we normally tend to think of our identity as the central core of our 'being' or the 'essential self.' This self is a product of the demands of a particular situation. We know that "identity and selfhood are constructed through a complex and continuous process of negotiation between the individual and society" (Mukherjee Tutun158). What is the initial stage of identification for a baby? The implications of male and female identities get registered and begin to consolidate through various cultural and societal codes. This then leads to the routine behaviour of everyday life, relating to the practice of the body, shaping mental attitudes, and habits of thinking. Thus, the self is a subject that necessitates the study



of the environment as well, within the space where identities are created and enacted. Therefore, a different role is played by the self, and the specificities of time and place become more important here. As Pierre Bourdieu has stated, this expresses the concept of habitus. Simply put, the self will change when history and socio-cultural circumstances change. Thus, the self is neither static nor stable; it contains platitudes and excess.

This article explores the representations of the performance of the arts and the self. The artist receives no work and is extremely poor. They do not gain recognition during their lifetime and are cast out of society because of their 'Guhya Sadhana' (secret spiritual lifestyle). To somehow negate the harsh realities of his life, he accepts the situation. In actuality, his dream world is rudely shattered as reality intrudes. Sudhir Chakravarti's success lies in giving his book depth and analytical details, especially with the use of Baul Fakir songs from the artist. My purpose here is to locate the context and the journey of the researcher. I consider it a stroke of genius. Before Sudhir Chakravarti, his teacher had done the theoretical analysis and provided deep insight into Baul philosophy but did not conduct fieldwork, limiting his reading merely to printed books, which I have mentioned earlier. The performing body of the artist encapsulates the dynamism of the man-woman continuum, where there are both possibilities for emergence and fusion. What is stressed is the construction of the performing body and identity in the performing space. This emphasizes the understanding that identity or gender is not a single option but opens up a range of possibilities and ways of thinking. We know that in time meditation, each Sufi sports a veil and meditates on his Lord as a woman would. They believe that Allah, the Almighty, is the one man, and the rest are all women. The same thing can be found in Vaishnavism, for Shakhibhava (the posture of a woman devotee) (Sarkar 58).

Chakravarti, in his book *Baul Fakir Katha* (2001), discusses how the baul artists are marginalized people and that their economic condition is miserable (Chakravarti 38). The baul songs play a deep and profound role. The main objective of Baul is "Kathar pithe katha o gaan er jababe gaan" (a question followed by an answer through the medium of songs that poses another question) (Chakravarti 48). As he states in his book *Gabir Nirjorn Pathe*, "Shruti o shmruti er parampara banchiya rake gaaner dhara loko yaithirjuo" (Chakravarti 48). Another notable aspect of the Sahebhdhani Samproday is the feeling of mind (bhaber paramparai) (Chakravarti 50). Sahebhdhani is a mixture of Allahdhani and Raidhani. The song of Kuber Gossain has a double meaning: one is the surface meaning, and the other is the deeper level of meaning. To attain God's grace, according to the belief of Sahebhdhani Samproday, we should control our libido. In the book *on folk-Cult and Rabindrasangeet* Pranesh Sarkar clearly depicted the inner meaning and interior of "folk" people. As he says "the song of Lalan Fakir asks one to bolt the room of Kama(libido) with the lock of Bhaba (realisation), and next unlock the said room with the key of Prema (love)" (Sarkar 66). Simply, one who is real love no longer gets involved in the act of sex (Sarkar 68). The work "Chakravarti" clearly explains that it is only through love that one can reunite with the Supreme Being. True love for humankind is equally valuable as love for God.

## Conclusion

We have to understand the Sahebhdhani community through the key of the song. Emancipation is possible only through loving people because it is only through song that one can permanently resist and feel, ever after, in the core of the heart of man. The main purpose of the people or community is to be a man and do what men do: become a human

being, listen to a human being, and know a human being. Why Chakravarti is remarkable in this field of research is that he is the man who has done his work more carefully, with dedication and culmination throughout his life. One who is a perfect connoisseur of love does not distinguish between the self and the other. He has come out of the circle or Institutionalized framework method of research. So, he was able to think from new and different perspectives for these so-called “marginal” religious sects. Therefore, his work has opened up a new horizon. He highlighted the subject of literary exchange. On the other hand, he created a research methodology that became an educational subject for future researchers. At the same time, his work has shown a new way in the field of literary history and cultural studies. That is why his work is also a fundamental document of social history.

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